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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 TASHKENT 000453

SIPDIS SIPDIS
DEPT FOR SCA, DRL, AND G/TIP
DRL/ILCSR FOR TRACY HAILEY AND TU DANG
G/TIP FOR MEGAN HALL
DOL/ILAB FOR CHARITA CASTRO, TINA MCCARTER, AND SEROKA MIHAIL
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA
AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG
AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK

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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: ACTIVISTS REPORTING UNRELIABLE CHILD LABOR DATA

REF: TASHKENT 73; TASHKENT 83

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard Fitzmaurice, Poloff; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 30, the independent Ezgulik human rights group released its report on child labor practices during the 2008 fall cotton harvest at a roundtable hosted by the British Embassy. While Ezgulik announced that nearly a million Uzbek children participated in the cotton harvest, their written report does not back up that finding. Unreliable reporting from Ezgulik and other activities has been cited (often without acknowledgement) by researchers and NGOs outside the country, often misinforming their advocacy efforts. Nevertheless, some of its findings tracked with those made by more reliable observers. Ezgulik's analysis of the factors driving the use of child labor during the cotton harvest and its policy recommendations also were broadly similar to those of UNICEF, the only international organization on the ground in Tashkent currently engaging the Uzbek government on child labor issues (ref A). End summary.

EZGULIK RELEASES CHILD LABOR REPORT AT BRITISH EMBASSY

¶2. (C) At a small roundtable on March 30 hosted by the British Embassy, the independent Ezgulik human rights group released its report on the use of child labor during the 2008 fall cotton harvest. In their presentation, Ezgulik director (and Birlik opposition party General Secretary) Vasilya Inoyatova and Ezgulik deputy director (and Harakat.net journalist and editor) Abdurakhmon Tashanov reported that 987,000 Uzbek students picked cotton during the harvest in 2008. Tashanov further claimed that the number of children participating in the harvest had increased since last year and was growing each year (Comment: In a private conversation with

poloff last year, however, Inoyatova estimated that 1.2 million Uzbek students participated in the 2007 cotton harvest. End comment.)

¶3. (C) The roundtable was attended by one other independent activist, Rapid Reaction Group member Sukhrob Ismoilov (who participates with Inoyatova in periodic trainings for Uzbek human rights activists conducted by Freedom House in Turkey), and local employees of the French, Swiss, and British Embassies. Two foreign diplomats attended (poloff and the Italian DCM), but no British diplomats were present. Last year, Ezgulik received a grant from the Embassy's Democracy Commission to conduct research for its child labor and other reports.

EZGULIK'S REPORT DOES NOT BACK UP SOME OF THEIR FINDINGS

¶4. (C) Ezgulik's Russian-language report in no ways substantiates its claim, made at the roundtable, that 987,000 Uzbek students participated in the 2008 fall cotton harvest. The written report does not provide an estimate of the number of Uzbek children who participated in the harvest across the country, but instead reports

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on the number of students who participated in the harvest from 15 specific schools in two districts of Samarkand and Bukhara province. The report also includes summaries of interviews with 36 survey respondents from those regions, including ten school students, ten parents, and six farmers. Last year, Ezgulik anonymously released a similar report on the 2007 cotton harvest, which was reportedly based on interviews with 141 persons in several districts of Kashkadarya and Syrdarya provinces. In that report, Ezgulik concluded that 199,000 students from Kashkadarya province and 60,000 students from Syrdarya province were involved in the 2007 cotton harvest.

EZGULIK GIVES CONFLICTING ACCOUNTS OF THEIR METHODOLOGY

¶5. (C) At the roundtable, Inoyatova and Tashanov claimed that Ezgulik conducted its research by collecting observations made by each of its 72 branch offices located throughout Uzbekistan. However, in a private meeting with poloff on March 25, Inoyatova reported that all of the research for their report was conducted by 12 Ezgulik activists - including herself, Tashanov, and several regional representatives. She reported that these activists traveled to the two districts of Samarkand and Bukhara province, where a majority of the data was collected.

¶6. (C) Comment: We believe Inoyatova was being more truthful in the private meeting. While Ezgulik claims to have 72 regional branches, it has been our general observation that the organization has a maximum of only about 12 to 20 committed activists inside Uzbekistan. End comment.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS FROM EZGULIK'S REPORT

¶7. (U) In its report, Ezgulik observed that students in the two districts they visited were taken from schools to pick cotton with authorization from local departments of education and that parental permission was not required. A few students in the districts were reportedly excused from picking cotton for medical reasons. In the two districts, survey respondents told Ezgulik that schoolchildren from grades six and higher (approximately ages 12 and older) picked cotton approximately 9 hours a day, including a one-hour lunch break. Farmers regularly provided lunch (either a hot meal or snacks) to the students, as well as drinking water. They also provided transportation for the students to the cotton fields and back home each day. Students picking cotton were watched by their teachers. Farmers paid students between 50 and 60 soums (approximately .04 dollars) per kilo of cotton. Students were expected to pick between 40 to 50 kilos of cotton a day at the beginning of the cotton season and less as the season went on (as there was less cotton to be picked in the fields).

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¶8. (U) The schoolchildren reportedly told Ezgulik that they did not mind picking cotton and missing school (this attitude, while not universal among Uzbek students, is common, see ref B). Both students and parents reported that students who refused to participate in the cotton harvest would be criticized at schools, while their parents would be looked down upon in the local community.

¶9. (U) Ezgulik leaders also blamed poor working conditions for the death of several students during the harvest. Their report cited the case of a boy in Bukhara province who was hit by a tractor as he was taking a nap in a cotton field, while another student reportedly died after falling from a truck as he was being transported to pick cotton. During their presentation, Ezgulik leaders also cited the case of a student in Jizzakh province who allegedly became ill with hepatitis while picking cotton and died at a local hospital, a girl in Jizzakh province who allegedly hung herself after being criticized by her teachers for not picking enough cotton, and that of two students in Bukhara province who were hit by a car and killed as they were walking to cotton fields in 2007

SOME EZGULIK OBSERVATIONS TRACK WITH THOSE OF OTHERS

¶10. (C) Ezgulik reported several findings which tracked with those made by more reliable sources this past fall (ref A). In their report, Ezgulik states that students in the two districts they visited picked cotton from approximately September 22 until early November. In their presentation, though, Ezgulik leaders reported that students in different areas of the country picked cotton for varying lengths of time. Inoyatova estimated that most students picking cotton did so for an average of about three to six weeks (which also generally tracked with observations made this past fall by international observers). Ezgulik also reported there was no evidence that children were exposed to harmful chemicals or pesticides, which it claimed were no longer being used to grow cotton. International observers have noted that Uzbek farmers, most of whom cannot afford expensive chemicals, have long relied upon safer (and less expensive) organic methods of fertilization and pest control (ref A).

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS ALSO TRACK WITH THOSE OF UNICEF

¶11. (C) Ezgulik's analysis of the factors driving the use of child labor during the cotton harvest and its recommendations for how to combat it are also broadly similar to those of UNICEF, the only international organization on the ground in Tashkent currently engaging the Uzbek government on child labor issues. In their presentation, Ezgulik's leaders blamed a variety of factors for the persistent use of child labor during the cotton harvest. They

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noted that poverty drove many Uzbek children to pick cotton to help support their families. They also observed that the Uzbek "national mentality" was an important contributing factor, as children have been used to pick cotton in Uzbekistan for generations and many Uzbeks see nothing wrong with the practice and are unaware of laws prohibiting it. Ezgulik leaders also noted that many private farmers have trouble during the harvest attracting adult laborers, who often head abroad to neighboring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan during the cotton harvest, where wages are higher. According to Ezgulik, Uzbek farmers are unable to pay higher wages because the government pays them too low of a price for their cotton.

¶12. (C) Ezgulik's leaders argued that the government's efforts to combat child labor were likely to fail unless it adopted wholesale reform of its agricultural system. In particular, Ezgulik's leaders argued that the government needed to increase its investment in the agricultural sector, including by paying farmers higher prices for their cotton.

NGOS AND OTHERS DRAW UPON EZGULIK'S RESEARCH

¶13. (C) Ezgulik's observations on child labor in Uzbekistan in previous years have been cited, often without full attribution, by international NGOs and researchers focusing on child labor in Uzbekistan, none of whom have personnel on the ground in Uzbekistan to verify Ezgulik's results. For example, in a March 13 op-ed on the Reuter's website, International Crisis Group (ICG) spokesman Andrew Stroehlein reported that a new study from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) allegedly demonstrated that 2.7 million children in Uzbekistan are forced to pick cotton each year (out of a total primary and secondary school population of 5.1 million.) However, the "new" SOAS study, entitled "Invisible to the World: The Dynamics of Forced Child Labor in the Cotton Sector of Uzbekistan," is based almost entirely on data from 2007 and earlier - some of it provided by Ezgulik and other activists, though they are not cited by name. The only sources cited from 2008 were from independent news websites operated by exiled human rights activists and regime opponents, which are frequently unreliable sources of information.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) We believe that Ezgulik is trying its best to report on child labor practices in Uzbekistan under very difficult conditions for activists. Nevertheless, Ezgulik's ability to objectively report on child labor during the cotton harvest is hampered not only by government interference in its activities, but also by its small number of activists. Ezgulik also has a history of overstating the results of its research, which is not surprising: activists in Uzbekistan see their primary role as uncovering abuses

and pressuring the government to make changes, not as serving as objective sources of information. Some NGOs and researchers outside the country appear to take child labor reporting by Ezgulik and other activists largely at face value and have no means to verify it (though these NGOs can hardly be blamed for the Uzbek government's refusal to allow them to operate inside the country.) Still, despite the shortcomings of Ezgulik's methodology, we generally agree with their analysis of the factors driving the use of child labor in Uzbekistan and its recommendations on how to more effectively combat the problem.

¶115. (C) One important point we need to continue to stress to Uzbek officials is that it is their own interest to allow an independent assessment of child labor practices in the country, as it likely to show that some of the publicized findings by local activists and international NGOs are overstated. In addition, we will continue to encourage the Uzbeks to formally invite the return of an ILO representative to Tashkent to assist the government on finding alternatives to child labor.

NORLAND